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LETTER TO MY FUTURE DAUGHTER

Alana Brown-Davis

I don't recall telling you the story of how we cultivated a land of crops and flowers during quarantine. Your grandma, although she prefers the title Gold Del, was off work and said to herself: *Self, I think I'm gonna plant a garden this spring.*

She recruited me, or shall I say made me assist, by ending my superficial pleasures: bingeing *My Name Is Earl* or chilling on the couch. I found out soon enough that Mama had other intentions for this extended spring break. I would not be wasting my time on that little digital drug called a phone.

If I could give a rough estimate of the amount of money Mama spent on potting soil and whatever flower could bring a rainbow to a garden that would make passers by have car accidents—marigolds, lilies, hydrangeas, lantana, verbena—I'd have to say she spent about two hundred dollars on flowers alone. I took on the job of pulling up weeds so that they wouldn't smother the flowers, using rusted tools that were probably made by neanderthals. One of them broke after I slammed it in the dirt about ten times trying to catch a stubborn root that wanted to remain hidden. Dry dirt caked my gloves as I yanked the weeds and removed the old, white marble rocks holding them in place.

After an hour's worth of work, my upper calves and biceps began to hurt. I could picture my great-grandfather working in a field where my house is currently built. He'd probably have told me to keep digging; that it'd only take longer if I kept stopping. He died two years before I was born. From the stories I've heard, if he had been out there in the garden with me, he'd probably have shook his head out of disappointment.

His stock ran through me, and not in a way that flows in your blood and fills you up with something wonderful. It missed the mark somewhere along the way. You'd never catch me planting 'cause I had bigger fish to fry. My sole concern that summer was with anything that got me out of Mississippi. I could hear it already: *Oh so, you're one of those folks ashamed of being from the South?* No, anything but that. I was a proud black chick from the sip who spoke with a drawl and prolonged vowels to match. Country music and Outkast were a necessity of mine.

I ran barefooted in the grass and drank from the hose whenever I'd be watering the plants and on top of that the sight of dirt roads was always and forever will be pleasing. Yes, your mama was *country*.

I had an urge to reinvent myself long before the virus hit. I could never determine what was the cause of it. Probably a hunger to see the scary world for what it was; not a complete monster, more of a place in need of understanding. It sort of stemmed from the funeral of my grandmother's friend that I went to as a child. The idea came to me in the middle of her eulogy that she had never traveled to Paris, or even the fifty states—just from her home of Mississippi to Louisiana. I thought of that as living in this box and I couldn't do that. There were so many folks I saw die without having an adventure, sometimes refusing to.

It could've been just the "city" I grew up in. You know all the small towns like to call themselves cities so folks won't forget that they matter too. All that there was in our town was fast food restaurants, gas stations that had started to close early because of robberies, and old buildings losing their shine. Every year on the first Saturday in June, the Dairy Festival would come and leave us longing for three hundred and sixty five days for the next summer. When my grandma was a kid there was even a movie theater. Now, you gotta travel forty something miles to find one, or, truth be told, anything entertaining. And I wasn't the only one who was looking for a way out.

A man I talked to once put it in perspective : *There's nothing here for y'all to look forward to. We're losing yall. Most of the youth go to college in the state then leave to find something better. The industries are struggling and let's not forget the so-called "hospitality" when it comes to back-handed bigotry.* I had made it up in my mind by the time I was about thirteen that I was going to get out some kind of way. I didn't know how, I just knew it had to be by the time I left school.

The only thing that was somewhat of an oasis was Jackson, the state capital, and the few appealing things there were the JSU band and the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum. You know, I didn't even want to go to college in the state because I figured if I did, that was one more way I'd be stuck here forever. I was also one of those kids that if Mama went to the Piggly Wiggly without me, I sat in fear until she texted me to come help her with the groceries. So many folks died in a split second that I didn't want her to be one of them. That was the dilemma I was in. I wanted to get away but how far could I go that was still close to home?

I always was scared of *it*. I could be listening to a song about it that normally

wouldn't bother me, then a lyric would give me this angsty vibe. All of a sudden, I'm trying to erase this image of my headstone in a graveyard filled with dead relatives that'll be there forever. I think that's the big kick in the butt. There's so much we can say *if* to. *If it does happen great, if it doesn't happen, oh well there's always next time.* That's probably the main reason why the pandemic had everyone on edge. Within one week, everything shut down because of a virus that none of us thought could hurt us, young folks especially. It was reserved for the old, not us. Not me, who hadn't gotten out of this desperate state to see what else was out there. Not my friends who wanted the same thing as me: to *breathe*. So, when the news reports came on about the increasing death toll, I left the room. When my grandma got calls in the middle of the night about cousins who'd passed away and may've had the virus, I left the room. I wanted to be like the perennials I helped Mama plant in her garden knowing that I'll be reborn the next spring. I wanted to fall into the soil and then come back precious.

This is what I think while watering your grandmother's flowerbeds. By now the flowers have wilted from lack of care—marigolds, lilies, hydrangeas, lantana, verbena—some grasping onto the sun for life, the others long gone. All of the weeds grew back just as soon as we pulled them out the dirt. We laid black tarpaulin down and added more marble rocks to make the plants stand out, but we never finished what we started. I guess we'll do it again next year if we live to see it. *If.*

Death is bound to happen one way or another and I guess I'm eventually going to have to live with that. I don't know how or when or even if I'll meet you before it does. Just know that your mom wasn't perfect so she doesn't expect you to be. Don't ever settle, please don't and if you want to explore the world do it. You cannot hold back, baby. None of us have much time and you shouldn't spend whatever amount you may have waiting for something spectacular to happen. Watch the seeds and learn from them. It was a process to get them to the glorious flowers they were and for you it will be the same. I don't have many answers to give but I'll guide you. Make sure you always look over your shoulder when you feel alone. I'll be there smiling.

I love you baby.

ALANA BROWN-DAVIS is a rising junior from Tylertown, Mississippi and attends South Pike High School. When not reading or writing, she enjoys bingeing Netflix and playing her guitar.